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## Blogs in Language Learning: Maximizing Students' Collaborative Writing

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### Abstract

Educators have engaged with Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs or podcasts, to make learning more personalized, more interactive and more dynamic. Blogging has emerged as one of the most popular forms of online discourse. Blogging is seen as a learning platform in providing opportunities for learning English which can improve the students' knowledge about their language performance in writing. The unique nature of the blog's architecture and the low cost have not only affected how students can publish and distribute their work to a wider audience but also how the students see themselves as authors. This paper focuses on the use of blogs in a language and IT course which can help to maximize students' collaborative writing. Findings from the blogs include the perceptions of ESL students of how blogging can contribute to the development of the students' writing.

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### 1. Introduction

Writing a project paper individually can be a very painful experience to some people who may not have adequate ideas and writing skills. However, when the writing project is carried out collaboratively, whereby a few people are assigned to write certain sections, and later put the sections together into a masterpiece, individuals in the group may find the exercise rewarding and exciting. Unlike face-to-face meetings among the group members to discuss the drafts of the writing, blog or weblog would allow the members to communicate with another faster and more frequent, share their drafts faster, improve their drafts faster, and produce their final written products with great satisfaction as they are not bound by time and space.

Studies in the past such as Izham Shah (2008) indicated that blogs provide a platform for students to participate equally in the learning process, and new topics can emerge outside of the classroom especially when the time constraint of the classroom limits the scope and participations in discussions. Supyan et al. (2010) have shown that use of weblog was able to reduce writing apprehension among the students. It also allows subscribers or bloggers to learn from one another in terms of ideas, language grammar and structure, and organization of their essays.

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In blogs, usually members of the group can publish their drafts immediately and receive comments from each other on the same day. By so doing, members can then compile the fragmented sections and organize the inputs into something more meaningful and more convincing. Members in the group can also enjoy privacy of publishing their inputs if they assign a password to the blogs. As writing is a social act, and it reflects the ability of the writers, some individuals are shy or apprehensive when they are asked to publish their writing in a public space like the blogs.

## 2. Review literature

Today's classrooms have used the emergence of new media by streamlining them to various aspects of their teaching. This inevitably affects teaching pedagogy in a positive way. For example, the use of blog also known as weblog which is a new form of blended learning. It combines face to face (FTF) teaching and learning by placing appropriate use of technology at its centre (Sharma & Barret 2007). Blog as an approach in teaching and learning can be best defined as a place where texts and visuals meet. It uses website as its platform for interaction purposes comprising instructional and learning activities with frequent and dated entries in reverse chronological sequence comprising hierarchy of texts, images, media objects, and data (Blood 2002; Winer, D. 2003 & Herring et al. 2005). Based on this premise, this approach was incorporated as the intervention learning method for improving students' writing skills focusing on the use of blog for Language and Information Technology course (SKBP1023).

Blog provides learning opportunities for learning English by the types of tasks the students engaged in, as a result, they can improve their knowledge about their own language (Kavaliaukiene et al. 2006). The ideation of language learning using blogs emerged because blogs are seen as tools for learning which will eventually improve students' language learning through its multimodal form. Thus, its uses were recognized for developing students' language learning development in general or specific skills like writing or used as an extension to traditional teaching and learning. A study conducted by Hall and Davidson (2007) showed that blogs improved the students' writing skills in learning which is evident of the flexibility of blogs. A local study conducted by Nadzrah (2007) found that low proficiency level students were able to write constructively by using blogs which was further supported by Nadzrah and Kemboja (2009) who conducted a study on a group of Social Sciences students taking general English proficiency course. Their findings indicated that blogs diminished barriers to learning English by providing them the opportunity to write freely without being judged for their grammatical mistakes. In another study, Supyan et al. (2009) conducted a classroom-based research which involved 35 postgraduate students. They were required to develop a blog using *Wordpress* tool from *Wordpress.com* consisting tutorial lessons which included texts and multimedia components with interactive exercises over a 14-week period for teaching and learning purposes. Using three types of instruments to measure the effectiveness of blogs, their findings suggested that teacher education program should expose pre-service and in-service teachers to contemporary technological tools for teaching. In addition, they can maximize their application of pedagogical principles in the teaching delivery using the blog or forum for effective instruction.

According to Godwin-Jones (2006), the advantages of using blogs as a writing tool are: encourages feedback and represents both writing and reading activity; critical analysis and encourages articulation of ideas and opinions; offers opportunities for collaborative learning; provides an environment in which students can develop skills of persuasion and argumentation; creates a more student-centred learning environment ; and offers informal language reading.

Thus, this action research contended the use of blogs as an intervention measure to enhance students' language learning and development. It was seen as a pedagogically sound instrument to be used as blogs were convenient to use, it is interactive in nature and an effective and popular form of communication. Jones (2006) indicates that since blog became a convenient and popular form of communication, it is well received by academia.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Design of the Study

This study employed a mixed method research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approach through combination of methods which are questionnaire and blog writing in the collection of data. A survey method was

used to examine the perceptions of the students concerning the ICT applications that they were familiar with. While content analysis was used to collect data of using blogs to maximize collaborative writing. The method used in this research was that of practical-deliberative action research (Hughes, 2001) which is where the researchers identify potential problems, underlying causes and possible intervention.

### 3.2 Research Instrument

The research instrument consists of blog as the writing samples and this relates to the collaborative writing process. Collaborative activities involved in the production of a document by more than one author, then pre-draft discussions and arguments as well as post-draft analyses and debates are collaborative components. Collaborative is used for two or more individuals who work together to produce a single document. Research on writing groups has identified three coordination strategies for group writing: parallel, sequential, and reciprocal. This study incorporates blog in language learning to accomplish the following objectives:

- To develop students' writing skills in using blogs.
- To use blogs as a collaborative writing tool.

Another research instrument used is the survey questionnaire which relates to ICT applications that the students are familiar with. The questionnaire comprise of 4 parts:

- Computer literacy
- Usage of computer
- Purpose of using Internet
- Owing a weblog

### 3.3 Sample of the Study

The sample consist 4 classes of 80 students in total who registered for the Language and Information Technology course (SKBP 1023) in Semester 2, 2009/2010. The students were from the English Language Studies (ELS) program and Literature program. Language and Information Technology course (SKBP 1023) is offered during year 2, second semester and the cohort of students for this course requires them to take other English courses in their first semester.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

In terms of computer literacy, 57% of the students reported that their knowledge and ability to use computer and related technology were considered good as shown in Table 1. Whereas 26.2% stated that they were comfortable with using computer programs and other applications that were related with computers. Thus, they were able to participate in the forum, communicate with instructors and friends, and write in their blogs continuously.

Table 1: Computer literacy

Computer literacy	%
Excellent	26.2
Good	57.0
Average	9.1
Poor	7.7

As for using computers, the students seemed to be highly engaged in such activities as word processing (77.1%), accessing Internet (71.3%), and using e-dictionaries/encyclopaedia (73%) as illustrated in Table 2. These data are in line with the purpose of using Internet as shown in Table 3. As for the Internet activities, they seemed to be highly engaged in such activities as sending and receiving e-mails (89.2%), searching information (65.4%), blogging

(79.4%), joining a forum (81.5%), and chatting (89.5%). Thus, 81.3% of the students reported that they have a weblog and have full access to the Internet.

Table 2: Usage of Computer

Usage of Computer	Yes(%)	No (%)
Microsoft Word	77.1	22.9
Dictionary/ Encyclopedia	73.0	27.0
Game	53.5	46.5
Internet	71.3	8.7
Entertainment	47.1	2.9
Web Design	19.7	80.3

Table 3: Purpose of using Internet

Purpose of using Internet	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sending and receiving e-mails	89.2	10.8
Searching information	65.4	34.6
Blogging	79.4	20.6
Download	58.8	41.2
Joining a forum	81.5	18.5
Chatting	89.5	10.5
Online Games	16.0	84.0

## 5. Qualitative Findings

The students were required to post six posting throughout the 14 weeks of study. 6 different topics were given to the students which were syllabus based and the postings included the following:

1<sup>st</sup> posting: An example of Reading comprehension OR Restructuring of texts OR Matching or jigsaw reading OR Problem solving. Find one example of text online that you can use to explain one of these types of reading. Explain the activities and the reading text. You have one week from your tutorial class time to post in your blog.

2<sup>nd</sup> posting: Computer assisted writing. Search for activities that you can use and explain about computerized writing. Find examples of software that you can use and examples of URL that host computerized writing activities. Discuss how can one improve their writing using the computer.

3<sup>rd</sup> posting: Using the computer and online materials for research. You are required to find at least five resources or references. Summarize and add the information in a good coherent essay format.

4<sup>th</sup> posting: Search in the internet for articles or publications on the applications of concordance. Write the gist of the discussion and the summary of the article in your blog.

5<sup>th</sup> posting: Online quiz/test. Browse any language learning url and do the online test or quiz. Describe your experience taking the online test. Make sure you discuss the ability of the test to provide immediate feedback, randomization, security features as presented in lecture.

6<sup>th</sup> posting: Answer the questions in writing pertaining to your experience using blog.

During the 14-week course the students were asked “how blogging enhance their writing skills?” Content analysis was used for the data collection of using blogs to maximize collaborative writing. 5 themes were found which consisted the following:

A. Vocabulary.

The students stated that when they wrote in their blogs, they increased their vocabulary usage and general knowledge.

- *R1: Well, if u ask me I would say yes! Web blogging really helps me not just in my writing skill but also in other forms such as my expansion of vocabulary in English and general knowledge.*

B. General knowledge (related to writing).

This is to know about technology and how to share knowledge and exchange ideas and opinions.

- *R2: I've learned how to distribute information. I also practice writing correct sentences.*

C. Motivated

The students commented that blog writing provided an exciting and motivating learning environment where the students have a sense of ownership and readership. Blogging increased student interest, motivation and confidence in writing.

- *R3: Instead of using normal or common words, I tried to use a lot of new words that sounds more sophisticated or bombastic.*
- *R4: I plan what I am going to write as well as look at the grammar.*

D. Grammar

Blog writing did enhance the students' writing skills because they realized their grammatical mistakes through the comments given by their lecturers and peers which acted as a reminder for them not to repeat the same grammatical mistakes in all the postings to come. Some students described their writing strategies such as reference checking in terms of grammar and spelling and making sure their writing would convey the meaning they intended.

- *R5: While I read, I observed the word that they used and the strength that they got in their writing. It's hard for me to explain in words but I think, besides writing, reading also can enhance my writing skill in terms of my knowledge in grammar and vocabulary which I can apply when I do some writing.*
- *R6: I also has started to develop the love for writing ever since I did web blogging. The more I write, the more I realize the mistakes that I've done. In this case, it is the grammar of the English language . I know that my grammar is not really 'fantastic' but at least, I think it's getting very much better compared to my first year first sem.*

E. Reading

Blogging process encouraged the students to write more freely – they are engaged in fluency work rather than in accuracy work. In other words, they focused on meaning rather than forms and the writing is meaningful in an authentic environment.

- *R7: Yes, I think that blogging, more or less will improve my writing skills because in the process of blogging, I have the intention to draft my outline of my postings and construct all my ideas in order to form all the ideas in a proper passage. A better quality passage will reflect my ability in pursuing the language and course.*

- *R8: Yes, through blogging, it definitely improve my writing. When I come across with the difficulty of the vocabulary, I will check out the dictionary. From that, I will be able to learn new words and how to construct sentences while blogging. Each time when blogging, it helps to improve my writing ability significantly.*

## 6. Implications of the study

Blogs have been widely used in universities such as Harvard and MIT as a “vibrant link between the students, teachers and the university” (Satish & Kaila 2005). One of the features of a blog that is essential to language learning is that it can be used to maximize students’ collaborative writing as discussed in this study. As students write and express their views on specified topics, they also learn from their peers and themselves; thus this promotes self-learning. Self-learning signals students’ ability to be independent and thus become their own ‘player’ in the learning process. Educators will be aware of the distinction in the use of different genres in writing using blogs. Bloggers in language learning can create better postings and attract new readers. Reading strategies used by bloggers can contribute to the field of research in writing in using blogs.

## 7. Conclusion

The adoption of using blogs as instructional technology can create a space beyond the more traditional classroom setting that can be used judiciously to facilitate learners’ collaborative writing processes and interactions. Blogs offer students a high level of autonomy while creating a new opportunity for interaction with peers. For example, blogs gives more benefits to students in terms of sharing their collaborative writing in an interactive social environment; thus, this will motivate the students to improve their writing skills. Blogging also offers a useful learning environment that gives the students a chance to create a strong sense of community in which they can participate actively while learning. Most importantly, they can practice the language using different skills, especially in writing, in an authentic learning environment. Students often learn as much from each other as from instructors or textbooks but collaborative writing using blogs offer another mechanism for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and acquisition.

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